



## MEDIA RELEASE

July 19, 2018

### **VFFA response to the Bega Valley Fires Independent Review**

The Bega Valley Fires Independent Review was commissioned by the NSW State Government in response to public pressure and media interest in the Reedy Swamp Fire that occurred on 18 March 2018, and subsequently impacted on the township of Tathra.

The media reported a long-standing turf war between the two predominant fire services in NSW and the Minister for Police and Emergency Services responded with an announcement that Mr Keelty will be conducting a full review for the government so that we don't get these questions in the future.

The VFFA welcomes any opportunity to openly and transparently review and debate topics that impact upon public safety and the provision of emergency services to the people of NSW.

The following VFFA response to this review is provided:

- The terms of reference, as directed by the Minister for Police and Emergency Services were not broad enough, they did not address the root causes of this disaster to provide the best possible service delivery to the community of NSW.
- The review is totally disconnected from country and has dangerous false concepts that are made from not knowing the land. Both fire services would be wise to consult with and learn from Indigenous land management experts.
- There is no mention of the case study where the Tathra fires did not burn previously treated, cultural burn areas. Visit <https://vimeo.com/270076279> to learn more.
- The review has suggested that a single, civilianised call and dispatch centre could be linked to the future move of the RFS communications centre to new premises. The VFFA is supportive of a civilianised call and dispatch centre, but we are concerned that this location is too close to RFS influence and will only serve to exacerbate the turf war issues.
- Mr Keelty has taken a completely different tack to that used in the QLD review, recommending amalgamation. QLD Rural Fire Service is now part of Queensland Fire and Emergency Services.
- It is highly probable that this review was influenced by the Minister for Police and Emergency Services, Mr Troy Grant or sanitized before its release.
- It appears that the review was withheld until its release suited the NSW Government, the RFS and the RFSA. It is interesting that it was released just in time for the RFSA conference at Rose Hill Race Course.
- The fact that both Commissioners have stood by and allowed middle management to take the heat for the issues raised in this review in nothing short of treachery. Any decent leader would accept blame, then work towards changing cultural issues that exist.
- You can't have two fire bosses. The VFFA recommends a move in the same direction to that of the QLD model. This can be achieved as a staged implementation over a number of years. A single service model has the potential to create career pathways between volunteer, part-time and full-time service.

## Indigenous Land Management and Cultural Burning

The VFFA recommends that both fire services engage Indigenous land management and cultural burning experts to advise, supervise and monitor land management, hazard reduction and cultural burning practices in NSW.

The Aboriginal Land Council has young people burning country on the South Coast (right now) in a bid to prevent wild fires like the Tathra example and healing the area with native vegetation instead of dead leaves and rubbish. These young people are only in their early twenties and already more connected to the country than most of the highly paid fire experts involved in this turf war. These young people are doing this work with no wages, no vehicles, and no firefighting equipment at all.

Indigenous people are working in the Tathra area, burning the affected areas to prevent invasive native regrowth which makes the country full of fuel and the next fires far worse.

This is the first project of its kind in modern history in the recovery of torched country.

Indigenous land management expert, Victor Steffensen has been engaged in burning activities all over Australia this year. He says that “the window to burn is huge if you know how to read the country”.

## Management of our National Parks

The VFFA recommends that more Indigenous Australians are engaged to influence, advise, supervise and monitor the management of our National Parks.

The lessons to be learned extend way beyond bush fire mitigation and hazard reduction.

Increasing the involvement of Indigenous Australians in the management of our National Parks should occur as a matter of priority.

## Trigger Points that lead to Service Delivery Changes

At no time has the NSW State Government settled upon appropriate trigger points that lead to changes in service delivery models across NSW for the fire services. At what point should a fire service in a particular area, staffed by volunteers (unpaid workers for the State of NSW) be resourced with paid part-time workers (retained firefighters) and at what point should a fire service in a particular area be resourced with paid full-time firefighters. These trigger points could also be used in reverse to review existing arrangements where it may be necessary to discontinue the engagement of full-time or part-time firefighters and engage volunteers. This is a sensible and balanced approach that strives to avoid placing too much pressure on volunteers and part-time firefighters.

Our volunteers and part-time engaged emergency service workers are a valuable resource for the State of NSW, we need to support and respect them for the tremendous work they do.

The Bega Valley Fires Independent Review was conducted quickly, why are we still waiting for an inquiry into the Sir Ivan fire that ripped the heart out of many rural people, farmers and graziers?

Perhaps the answer to that question is linked to the demographics of each area. One could be forgiven for thinking that the further away from the coast you live, the less important you are to the NSW State Government and mainstream media.

The Volunteer Fire Fighters Association (VFFA)

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Please visit the VFFA web site for additional information at [volunteerfirefighters.org.au](http://volunteerfirefighters.org.au)